# World Chronicle

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## UN AIDS ELECTIONS

The United Nations Electoral Assistance Division was created in 1992. Its major activities include evaluating government requests for electoral assistance, conducting needs assessment missions, collaborating in the design of electoral assistance project activities with other UN system agencies and in developing the electoral components of peacekeeping operations. In this episode of **World Chronicle**, Carina Perelli, Director of the Electoral Assistance Division of the United Nations' Department of Political Affairs, talks about how the UN helps countries organize free and fair elections.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

What do East Timor, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Africa, Niger, Guinea Bissau, Mexico, Mozambique, Haiti and Yemen have in common? The answer is that all of them have recently received electoral assistance from the United Nations. Established in 1992, the Electoral Assistance Division is responsible for the coordination of the activities in this field.

Our guest today is an expert in the field of elections. She is Carina Perelli, Director of the Electoral Assistance Division of the United Nations' Department of Political Affairs. Joining me to talk with Ms. Perelli are Tony Jenkins from *Expresso of Portugal* and Edith Lederer from *The Associated Press*.

Ms. Perelli, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Ms. Perelli, how did the UN get into this field? It seems a far cry in a way from some of the things that the UN was set up to do. Is it a fairly recent development? Is it something that the UN has been pushing on countries or have countries come to the UN to urge the UN to get involved?

**PERELLI:** No, in fact it started as part of the decolonization processes followed with peace processes, deeply associated with precisely agreements for peace and it was not pushed by the UN. In fact it was generated by the circumstances, by history basically, to needs of the countries either because they were decolonizing and therefore they needed sort of neutral actors to guarantee the process or even help organize it, to afterwards providing more support to enhance the credibility of the institution so – and we operate only by request.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Now, we speak about – or you speak about – electoral assistance but in fact it's election organizing to a great extent, isn't it?

**PERELLI:** We have done – we have had several cases of election organizing itself. The latest one being precisely East Timor ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And Namibia, of course.

**PERELLI:** ... and Namibia, Cambodia and South Africa and Mozambique – but those processes – we tend to be very careful about not trying to substitute the authorities of

the country because the UN is not there to do things instead of the actors in the country. We are there at the request of the country in order to help them do it better or ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And to ensure that the elections are free and fair.

**PERELLI:** ... and credible and really there's a level – more or less level playing field for all parties involved, and that basically are the inhabitants of a country, become fully entranchised citizens. They have their rights and in that sense, yes, it might be a bit unusual but it's fully within the intentions of the charter of creation of the United Nations because it is an exercise of precisely allowing people to exercise their political rights.

**JENKINS:** In a sense there's nothing more neutral that the United Nations can or should do. It should be there as an impartial observer. But there's nothing more political in an election and I assume, in fact I know, that there are a number of occasions when you have gone into work in the field where the governing side, the regime of the moment, has expected you to exercise some sort of political influence in order to justify or affirm what they have done. Most recently in East Timor, for example, the former foreign minister of Indonesia, Ali Alatas, has admitted that the Indonesia Government expected the vote to be much closer than it was and they were extremely upset with the UN and they wanted you to investigate all sorts of alleged abuses. How difficult is it for you to play a neutral role and how often do you find yourself in this position?

**PERELLI:** I was smiling because basically every single operation we conduct is a political minefield because obviously politicians would not be politicians if they didn't try to level the playing field a bit more for themselves than for others. It's part of the political game and of course the UN does not intervene in routine elections except providing, sometimes even very focussed, technical assistance. But normally, all the requests we've received have to do with either major forms of assistance in a well-established country where democracy seems not to be a problem but we're asked to help them reform the system and that is an extremely, extremely difficult political exercise in the sense that you're playing with the rules of the game and with forms of representation to those hot spots in the world where basically the UN is called upon to be the neutral actor that will warranty that the process happens. So, yes, it is extremely, extremely delicate and we are always in this sort of minefield.

**JENKINS:** So how do you do it? Let's take the case of East Timor where in the days immediately prior to the vote, for example, the Indonesian government sent in 700 so-called electoral observers on the military shift, with money from the central government.

Some of them, as far as we are aware, actually emptied out their jail cells and you're simply instructed to accredit these people as electoral observers and I believe that at first your man on the ground said 'no way' but in the end in fact you did register 200 of them and subsequently there are those who say that some of those people who were there as election observers then turned around and participated in the rampage, the burning, the destruction, the murder. How do you deal with a situation like that? What happened on the ground? What went on behind the scenes?

**PERELLI:** As it is a very delicate exercise of caution, how do you deal with that? Basically, on a personal level first, by being ready to resign from your post anytime they ask you to do something that goes against your principles.

**JENKINS:** Did you have to threaten to resign in East Timor?

**PERELLI:** No, but I am always ready to do that -- it's called integrity -- and by choosing an extremely good team but also by remembering that politics is the art of the possible not of the ideal one and therefore, yes, sometimes you have to make concessions but those 200 observers that were registered had to fulfill a certain number of conditions including registering their names as taking their identities and with the Indonesian Government having to assume full responsibility for their registration and therefore if one day this prove that any of those observers participated in the rampage, they can be charged because they can be fully identified.

**JENKINS:** And some of the blame will be assigned to the previous Government in Indonesia, presumably.

**PERELLI:** That's the kind of thing where I prefer not to comment for obvious reasons because the file is still open.

**LEDERER:** You've talked about minefields in a certain way in East Timor but there have been other minefields in Cambodia, for example, and certainly in some of the other elections that you've conducted in, not only Central America, but elsewhere in Africa, how do they differ and what can you really do to assure the political parties who are in opposition that the United Nations is indeed trying to be fair and it's not trying to take sides?

**PERELLI:** First of all, let me explain for a second how we operate when we receive a request, because I think that is important. First of all, we don't go to any country where we are not invited. We are not a force of intervention. When we receive that request, we send what is called a needs assessment mission, where at least one of the members of my

staff has to be present during that needs assessment mission where we speak with absolutely every single player, and part of the terms of reference that we give to the country is that basically if there are restrictions in the type of people we can visit or talk to, then we don't go. So we gather a certain number of opinions regarding our own intervention even before making a decision. Once we get the needs assessment done – a needs assessment doesn't presuppose that we're going to accept the request – we reserve the right of rejecting requests for a variety of reasons, time being one, very important. I mean, we are not going to come to a country two days before the election just to rubber stamp a process. The ability to negotiate with the government and the opposition regarding our own rules and our extremely important set of criteria. The total freedom in terms of appointing staff is another one. Total access, immunity. If we decide to take on their request, then we start building the mission. And there, I would say, is probably the most delicate, the most important part of our work. We work basically with people who are very young, extremely committed, who have been working with us for a long time and I'm talking – sometimes of people ....

**LITTLEJOHNS:** You're not talking about your own staff.

**PERELLI:** I'm talking about – how would you call them – I mean, we call them here the series 300's, which is the mission appointees. They are not part of the core staff of the UN. They are probably the most vulnerable ...

**LEDERER:** Are they paid or they volunteer"

**PERELLI:** They are paid. We have two categories. One is the series 300 which is basically experts who work for us and are appointed as staff for the duration of the mission. Then we have that incredible resource called the United Nations Volunteers who are people who work for basically a very low pay as part of the ....

**LITTLEJOHNS:** UN equivalent of the United States Peace Corps.

**PERELLI:** Exactly. Exactly. Very similar to that and these people are – in a sense, it always makes me laugh when I read in the media or in the newspapers that -- talking about the bureaucrats at the UN because these people, most of them are average age 30, come from all over the world, sleep in the floor – they are people who are ready to get the job done and we know them -- most of them personally.

**JENKINS:** Obviously they're all highly dedicated, very enthusiastic. Presumably because these missions sometimes are very controversial, they themselves can become targets. Have you lost many people? Have you had any casualties over the years?

**PERELLI:** Thank God, we haven't had people killed but we have had people running very high risks on the electoral side. And yes, they are targets not only targets in terms of their lives, but also they are targets in terms of defamation campaigns. They are putting their careers on the line every time they go to the field. So, yes, in a sense, they are permanent targets. They know it and they are very careful. And that's why when we have difficult missions, I tend to handpick them myself.

**LEDERER:** Okay, you've just come out of a difficult mission. Cambodia was a difficult mission. What lessons do you take out of those missions that for instance you've taken to perhaps the requests that you're going to be dealing with next year. I see that there are requests to the UN for help from Tanzania, Zambia, Lesotho, perhaps others.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Perelli, just a second. This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Carina Perelli, Director of the Electoral Assistance Division of the United Nations' Department of Political Affairs.

**PERELLI:** One of the lessons we keep learning but difficult to implement is that we should probably arrive earlier and we have been in fact been moving the date of arriving into the country. Of course, we depend on the request, when we receive the request. There are minimal times, but we should probably move them a bit. We need to arrive earlier. We need also more resources because one of the problems that we have is that when we receive a request, then we go for the resource mobilization in order to set up the operation. So even though we might have extremely good intentions to do things earlier or even better, we are dependent upon the fact that the money has to enter the kitty in order to be able to start implementing our plans.

**LEDERER:** One would assume that after all the elections associated with the word democracy, there should be on paper at least widespread support in the United Nations for anything that's going to promote democratic ideals and principles.

**PERELLI:** Yes, there is but we think that we need to do a resource mobilization.

**JENKINS:** Perhaps the other side of the coin to that question which is there are times when you have done excellent work and it's been subsequently being undermined. In Cambodia for example, where you did an excellent job and there are as you know, often spoken about in this building, there are a number of people who feel that the work that you achieved was undermined subsequently by Yasushi Akashi who went in and forced the winners of that election, Funcinpec, to accept the coalition with Hun Sen which essentially

undermined the democratic role of the people as it was expressed in the vote that you worked so hard to achieve. Have you had any disappointments like that? Are you allowed to express some opinion about what's being done to your work afterwards?

**PERELLI:** Well, I'm known in this building as being rather vocal and in my offices there's always a small sign saying "do me a favour, fire me". The problem also is that we are learning lessons as an Organization. And the International Community is learning lessons also when it's doing this democratization processes. One of the things we are learning and we are advising about is that, as important as the pre-electoral as the post-electoral and that you cannot conceive of an election as merely a technical exercise, it's probably the most highly political exercise in the whole political game. So if you don't plan the election as part of an overall and encompassing strategy regarding the whole process, you can end up with a situation where basically the operation was a success but unfortunately the patient died. And that's the kind of thing that is very frustrating as a professional but it's part of our learning and that's why we always now have the tendency to say, "okay we are a part of what exactly? Where do we fit in this process?" Because election provides an excellent opportunity to create public space where issues can be debated and actors can be recognized and interests can be negotiated and has to be understood as part of the electoral process and not merely as an electionists' folly. So we're learning, yes. Sometimes it's very frustrating. Sometimes you say you wish you had been a little less successful in your operation. Politics is the art of the possible.

**LEDERER:** Okay, so go back to East Timor. You had a lot of trouble before the election. The daughter of friends of mine was one of your volunteer and she sent me several emails about the lack of support that she felt that she was getting on the ground. On election day, by some miracle, there was a great turnout and then there was this disaster afterwards. This is not going to be the last time that the United Nations goes into a place like East Timor and perhaps the UN will be called upon again to do the same thing, what would you do differently?

**PERELLI:** Let me put two two things you said in context. First, I was in East Timor personally and I'm part of the people who stayed behind and we're inside the compound during the siege by choice because that's where the Directors have to be when there are problems and you don't leave your staff behind.

**JENKINS:** The Captain goes down with the ship.

**PERELLI:** Uh-huh. One of the problems of East Timor, even we are talking about the politics of East Timor for a second, is that Timor was an almost miraculous operation in the sense -- from a technical point of view -- in the sense that normally, what we did in East Timor would have taken a well-established electoral commission around the world twelve weeks to eighteen months to prepare. It was done in three months and a half and it was done while implementation of the different steps of the election were happening at the same time that the negotiations were going on, which meant that there were permanent changes in the framework of the rules of what would be then. Our people there did a heroic job. Absolutely heroic and a superb technical job. That's the first point. And we are not the only ones. The logistics people of the UN are the unsung heroes of this process if you consider that we have three-months-and-a-half to deliver an election and having the vehicles reach East Timor because of the number of vehicles necessary will take many a month. So in that sense it was an incredible effort of the UN just to deliver. And why did the UN do this effort? Because it was perceived, and not only by us but by the East Timorese and we are in constant contact with them, that this was a window of opportunity they could not risk to lose and the UN had to facilitate this process so that they could use this window of opportunity. You don't choose for the people. They choose to run the risk. That's why if you were in East Timor and I was there during registration, the strategy the East Timorese were using, that's why it was not a miracle, until now it was not a miracle, it was the expression of the will of a people who have decided that they wanted to have an exercise of the ballot. They wanted their voices to be heard. So what they were doing was very simple. They disappeared into the bush, came back for registration day, disappeared again. If you went to East Timor on the day previous to the election, you were going to see that the towns were ghost towns. But they came on the evening before, you could see them coming down the mountains and from the jungle with their children and their food, voted and disappeared again.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Perelli, as most people know, the United Nations, for several reasons, is chronically short of cash. Who pays for operations like this? I mean the run in East Timor that you've gotten into some details, of course, was extremely costly. But what about other operations by and large? Are the governments calling for your assistance paying at least part of the cost?

**PERELLI:** Yes, it's a mix and funding is also one of the things that -- we're also very careful about funding because, of course, the easiest route would be to ask for

government who's requesting the assistance, to pay for the whole programme. But that would – depending on the kind of election we're discussing -- it could create links and problems and conflict of interest. So we go for a variety. What we do is we have appeals to the Member States. This comes out of a mix of voluntary contributions, some core funding, but we – in terms also of seeing how serious a government and a country is, in terms of their request for technical assistance -- we also request that they provide certain things either in terms of resources or resources in kind, which is use of buildings free-of-charge, and that sort of thing. But it's always a problem to -- we're always rushing against time in terms of getting the necessary resources in time to be able to implement seriously a plan. We use that time doing resource mobilization like mad, and we use that time planning like mad, and having several contingency plans within different time frames.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Have you often had to reject requests from Member States who want your assistance?

**PERELLI:** Yes, we reject more requests than we accept.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Why do you reject them?

**PERELLI:** Well, we reject them for a variety of reasons. One of the most common reason is the fact that we have specific guidelines in terms of the time frame for our intervention. If we receive a request that fall short of that deadline which has to be received at least three months before the election – and I'm thinking of moving that date and we're discussing that inside DPA -- then we will probably reject it unless there is some extenuating -- very extenuating – circumstance of sudden transition that requires a neutral arbitration. And the reason why we do that is not only because we have our own internal constraints but also because basically, we want to be serious about what we are doing and coming the day before is not serious. Other requests we reject because what the country is asking does not necessitate of the UN for it to be accomplished.

**JENKINS:** Are there times when you smelt the fish, you feel that you've been called in to rubber stamp something and you think, we can't do this?

**PERELLI:** Yes.

**JENKINS:** Can you give us examples?

**PERELLI:** No.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Perelli, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Carina Perelli, Director of the Electoral Assistance Division of the UN Department of Political Affairs. She was interviewed by Tony Jenkins from *Expresso of Portugal* and Edith Lederer from *The Associated Press*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

**ANNOUNCER:** Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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